MLRS Platoon Lanes: Battle-Focused Training

By Colonel L. Scott Lingamfelter

Finding the best venue to train the multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) platoons can be a challenge in an environment where units must get the most training out of every dollar yet maintain battle focus for combat readiness. Units must ensure the training is resourced, has trained observer/controller/evaluators (OCEs) and is situated on terrain with the right tactical environment. The 6th Battalion, 37th Field Artillery and its attached A Battery, 38th Field Artillery of the 2d Infantry Division in Korea met the challenge with battalion-orchestrated platoon lane training.

We began by assuming the concept of training two levels down, as set forth in *FM 25-101 Battle Focused Training,* is valid. Having the battalion orchestrate the training ensured it was resourced with OCEs, land and training aids and, most importantly, used a consistent model to train and evaluate all 12 platoons, applying the same standard.

Designing the Platoon Lane Training. Clearly, the MLRS battalion staff is not manned to provide OCEs for platoon lanes—nor is that the level to provide the best expertise to evaluate platoons. We elected to use battery commander/first sergeant teams as the OCEs for each of the four platoon lanes. We then selected the type of lanes we felt would best meet our training objectives, based on an assessment of our previous training results.

We agreed that one lane would be devoted to occupation of a tactical assembly area (TAA) and related survival tasks; another focused on the reconnaissance, selection and occupation of positions (RSOP) in an operational area (OPAREA); a third on delivery of fires; and the fourth and last a rearm and refuel lane. We designed each lane for specific terrain in relative proximity to each other (a brief

Task	Evaluated Platoons									A/38 FA		
Fire Missions	1/A	2/A	3/A	1/B	2/B	3/B	1/C	2/C	3/C	1/A	2/A	3/A
• Verify the survey data.	S	S	S	NS	S	S	NS	NS	S	S	S	S
• Post the FSCM in the POC.	NS	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	NS	S
• Plot the targets.	NS	NS	S	NS	S	S	NS	NS	NS	S	NS	S
• Establish digital communications.	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	NS	S	S	S
• Lay the platoon on the target.	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
• Transmit FM;FOCMD (at-my-command) to higher headquarters.	NS	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
• Recompute the amended grid, as directed.	NS	S	S	NS	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
• Execute the ITO target (ATACMS).	NS	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
• Execute SEAD target (MLRS).	S	S	S	NS	S	NS	S	S	S	S	S	NS

Legend:

ATACMS = Army Tactical Missile System
FM;FOCMD = Fire Mission; Forward Observation Command
FSCM = Fire Support Coordinating Measures
ITO = Integrated Tasking Order
MLRS = Multiple-Launch Rocket System
POC = Platoon Operations Center
SEAD = Suppression of Enemy Air Defense

Figure 1: Lane 3—Delivery of Fires. On the left side of the figure, major tasks of Stay Hot, Shoot Fast TTP are listed. ("S" means the platoon met the standard, and "NS" means the training was not to standard.) A platoon's performance can be evaluated, as highlighted vertically. Similarly, the battalion's overall performance can be evaluated by task, as highlighted horizontally.

road march) and for platoons to rotate through two lanes per day, executing one in the day and one at night. Each platoon would receive an orientation briefing upon arriving at the training site and a "hot wash" after-action review (AAR) upon conclusion of the lane.

The OCE teams reconnoitered the area and selected the ground best suited for each lane. Then lane team developed the lane it would observe and control, to include the tasks, conditions, standards, training scenario and evaluator package. The lane teams back-briefed the battalion commander, command sergeant major and staff on the concept for each lane. The battalion's key leaders proofed the lane concepts for consistency and quality while ensuring each lane met its training objective. In the process, battery commanders and their first sergeants received first-rate leader development in planning and resourcing battle-focused training.

We then rehearsed the lanes. Each OCE team walked its lane with the battalion's leadership to ensure the terrain was satisfactory to evaluate the platoons. This included giving the leadership the lane orientation briefing, discussing the flow of the lane and outlining the AAR process. The latter ensured that, when the platoon completed the lane, it would understand what happened, why it happened and what needed fixing.

A key aspect of this AAR process was the platoon had to "own" the results it achieved during a lane. To ensure this occurred, the OCEs needed to know how to conduct an AAR so the evaluated platoon determined what it should sustain or improve—avoid having the OCEs tell the platoons what needed sustainment or improvement. Practice AARs by the OCEs helped the process work.

Our results-oriented lane training design allowed us to see all platoons in a set environment against a consistent backdrop. We also agreed that the lanes would use a similar data collection method to enable senior leaders to see training trends not only in specific platoons, but across the battalion as well. Platoons having difficulty in certain lanes could recycle through portions of the lane and identify training requirements for the future.

Figure 1 shows the way we displayed results with the platoons across the top. We used "S" to indicate the platoon met the standard for the task and "NS" to indicate the platoon's training was not to standard.

With these indicators, a picture emerged. Along the vertical axis, we could tell if a platoon was having problems with a task(s). This suggested whether or not the platoon should be recycled through portions of the lane. We also could see if specific tasks across the battalion were problem areas for many of the platoons. This helped us begin planning future individual, collective and professional development (officer and NCO) training.

Lane 1: Occupy a TAA—Survive and Defend. We selected this critical preparation phase of any combat operation as our first lane. We found that, in general, the platoons had difficulty applying the factors of observation, cover and concealment, obstacles, key terrain and avenues of approach (OCOKA) as they occupy a TAA. The platoons understood how to occupy at the section level (establish individual fighting positions, use camouflage, etc.). But they were less adept at using their limited assets to clear the area before occupation and plan an adequate position defense. Also, the platoons understood how to operate their crew-served weapons, but their skills in constructing an M60 machinegun fighting position were not to standard across the board.

Finally, all platoons were challenged to conduct patrols adjacent to their positions. In several cases, the opposing force (OPFOR) captured platoon members on patrol, a fact unknown to the platoon leader, sometimes, for as long as an hour. In sum, we identified several key tasks needing training in the future.

Lane 2: RSOP. We elected to design the RSOP lane to look closely at the platoon's ability to receive a mission; conduct reconnaissance; plan, brief and rehearse the mission; and move to and finally occupy the firing position. We learned platoons do these fairly well.

But we noted the platoon sergeant wasn't used effectively during the reconnaissance

phase, particularly in preparing the platoon for the mission while the platoon leader was reconnoitering. This lack of synergy was evident when one platoon leader returned from reconnoitering and found his platoon sergeant unprepared for the upcoming mission because he failed to brief him before the reconnaissance phase. The result was the platoon leader scrambled to make up for lost time and effort—but to no avail. He was "killed" during the lane scenario, leaving his unprepared platoon sergeant to pick up the pieces.

A clear strength, however, was the priority of work during reconnaissance, particularly the use of survey and the ammunition platoon sergeant's efforts to make the occupation go smoothly.

Lane 3: Delivery of Fires. This lane evaluated "Stay Hot, Shoot Fast" tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) that are key to our ability to engage enemy targets quickly. (See the article "Stay Hot, Shoot Fast: An Evolving Concept in MLRS Tactics" by the author and Captain Robert D. Kirby, April 1995.)

In particular, the lane evaluated at-my-command (AMC) missions (laid on an aim point), when-ready (WR) amended missions, suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) missions and time-on-target (TOT) missions using the Army tactical missile system (ATACMS). Because we conduct these TTP often, our times, in most cases, met the standard (see the sample time chart in Figure 2). But crews not familiar with the TTP generally would find this lane a challenge.

One area that continues to need work is the careful management of the launcher data bases by crews and the platoon operations center (POC).

Lane 4: Rearm and Refuel. Platoons do not often practice these skills in the proper setting. Therefore, in this lane, we required them to establish and secure an ammunition cache site. We also coordinated with the division's air assault battalion for an air resupply of ammunition to the platoon cache, giving platoon members a chance to train arm signals and hook-up procedures with a UH-60 helicopter.

The platoon had to road march to a refuel-on-the-move (ROM) site and then quickly move through the site while also providing local security. Our platoons performed the refueling tasks well but clearly need work on how to establish and coordinate security with limited personnel.

Safety: Protecting the Force. While we didn't run a lane dedicated to force protection, we looked at safety comprehensively across all lanes. In each lane, we evaluated the platoon's use of the risk assessment process. We also implemented a system to capture safety violations by platoon. We used a risk assessment matrix for each lane (see Figure 3). The key is the linkage between the event, an associated hazard, the likelihood of its occurrence and the control that we established to prevent the hazard. With such emphasis on proactive prevention, we had no significant accidents or major heat-related injuries in very humid conditions during 10 days of training.

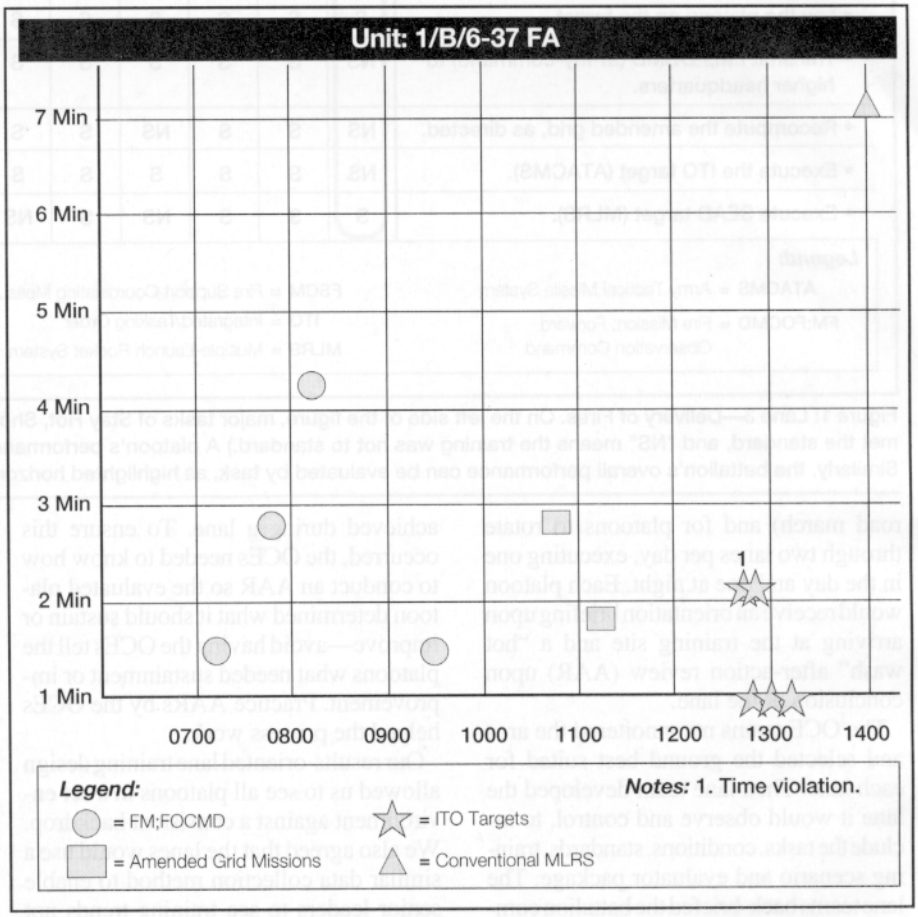

Figure 2: Lane 3—Delivery of Fires. In this figure, one platoon's firing mission times are charted for evaluation.

Event	Hazard	Risk	Control Measure
Conduct PCIs.	Leaders' Failure to Supervise	Low	• Key leaders ensure PCIs are conducted.
Deploy.	Accidents, Road Conditions	High	• Conduct convoy briefings on TCPs, road conditions for HETs, speed, etc.
Down-load HET.	Personnel Injury	Med	• Establish ground guides.
Move to TAA.	Fatigue	High	• Ensure soldiers rest ahead; conduct convoy and route reconnoissance briefings.
Endure hot weather.	Hot Weather Injuries	High	• Ensure soldiers are hydrated initially and continuously.

Legend: HET = Heavy Equipment Transporter; PCIs = Precombat Checks and Inspections; TAA = Tactical Assembly Area; TCPs = Tactical Checkpoints

Figure 3: Risk Assessment Matrix. Before executing a lane, 6-37 FA developed a risk assessment matrix for the lane to ensure the battalion recognized the potential dangers and implemented control measures for safe training.

We listed the most common safety errors and catalogued them by unit (Figure 4). What emerged was a picture (Figure 5) of the force protection areas in which individual platoons or the entire battalion needed attention.

The force protection process resulted in safe training and an informed AAR process. Using this methodology, units can improve their safety performance and avoid the fallacious assumption that no accidents mean all procedures are being executed safely and to standard.

Future Training. As each platoon finished a lane, senior leaders began planning future training, based on well-defined results. After the platoon lane training, we developed the focus for future Sergeant's Time and platoon-level collective training plus subjects for NCO professional sessions. In other words, we took the guesswork out of what tasks the platoons needed to spend their valuable training time on.

At first glance, some NCOs may contend that this is just another attempt to force-feed training to them. It is key, therefore, that the AAR process is effective—that the results are credibly to the NCOs who train the platoons. The areas of strengths and weaknesses must be self-evident to the platoon members as demonstrated by their performance in the lanes.

From the 48 platoon-level AARs conducted in this fashion, the lane teams and battalion commander conducted a battalion-level AAR for the platoons' key leaders—down to the section chief level—to review performance as well as trends across the battalion. The AAR highlighted footage captured on video—often enlightening. The process concluded with the trends in each of the four batteries and suggested future training.

Platoon lane training is ideal for MLRS and other units as platoons must train to one standard and fight using common procedures. The process provides the battery OCE teams leader development, the platoons a superb training opportunity, and unambiguous results that point the way to future training. Now that's *battle-focused* training.

Reason	Incidents
Individual *(Self Discipline to Standard)*	• Soldier not following hand and arm signals while operating boom control.
	• Section chief kept SPLL door open while traveling; chief not wearing CVC helmet.
Leader *(Enforce Standards)*	• HEMTT traveling on highway with outrigger extended (A-40-A/6-37 FA).
	• OE-254 emplaced without goggles (1/A/6-37 FA).
	• A-21 not chock blocked (1/A/6-37 FA).
	• OE-254 emplaced without goggles (3/B/6-37 FA).
	• Chock blocks not used (3/A/6-37 FA).
Training *(Skills to Standard)*	• Soldier not following hand and arm signals while operating boom control.
	• Section chief kept SPLL door open while traveling; chief not wearing CVC helmet.
Standards *(Standards/Procedures Clear and Concise)*	• A-21 not chock blocked (1/A/6-37 FA).
Support *(Equipment, Personnel, Facilities, Maintenance to Standard)*	• Battalion logistics not proactive in correcting maintenance problem with A-40 FA.

Legend:
CVC Helmet = Combat Vehicle Communications Helmet
HEMTT = Heavy Expanded-Mobility Tactical Truck
SPLL = Self-Propelled Launcher-Loader

Figure 4: Force Protection—Safety. The figure is a sample catalogue of 6-37 FA's most common safety violations that had been captured on individual incident forms.

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Focus	Evaluated Platoons									A/38 FA			Battalion
	1/A	2/A	3/A	1/B	2/B	3/B	1/C	2/C	3/C	1/A	2/A	3/A	Total
Individual	5	1	1	5	1	1		1		1	1	1	18
Leader	4	1	1	4	3	1		1		1	1	1	18
Training	3	1	1	2	3		1	1		1	1		14
Standards	1	1					1	1		1	1		1
Support	1		1							1			3
Total	14	4	4	11	7	2	2	4		5	4	2	59

Figure 5: Safety Violations. This matrix shows a clear picture of the battalion's safety violations. Listed vertically, 1/A had a total of 14 safety violations in all categories and needs work across the board; listed horizontally, the battalion needs to concentrate on safety in individual, leader and training tasks.